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Antonio SANDU[1]

Abstract

The article aims to develop an analysis of the construction of political propagandist speech. We will approach the advertising speech from the perspective of the visual semiotics' particularities. We will consider the theory of consensual truth, proposing a constructionist theory of the discursive truth, highlighting a particularity of the social construction of the truth – exercising the consensus trance as an instrument of visual semiotics.

Keywords:

Visual semiotics, constructionist theory of the discursive speech, consensus trance, propaganda.

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Introduction

Unlike the classic epistemology[2], where the issue of truth is correlated with the one of the adequacy of the statement to the given reality, the constructionist epistemology is rather interested in the way of gaining interpretative consensus through which the interpretative community assigns sensus to a semantic structure conventionally accepted as being real.

The logical analysis of the natural speech represents one of the main concerns of logicians and semioticians involved in the development of communication sciences. We call *semiotic imperialism,* the tendency of the specialists in communication sciences to appropriate the semantic of different fields of private knowledge, under the species of understanding them as communicative practices generating consensus. Knowledge is a matter of language, the decryption of meanings embedded in a message. The science methodologies themselves, especially those outside the social sphere can be understood as communicational syntaxes, through which we construct and reconstruct acts of language constituted in a symbolic universe labelled as reality. The interpretation of natural language therefore represents the activity of identifying a generative grammar that gives meaning to the communication object seen as exterior social fact.

The article aims to analyse the way of advertising speech construction, both the political and the educational one, manifested under the particularities of visual semiotics. We will approach this analysis from the perspective of the consensual truth theory, customizing the consensus trance as a form of negative manifestation of the strategies of gaining consensus in visual semiotics.

We will propose a series of constitutive elements of a model of constructionist-discursive theory of truth.

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[2] The article includes a series of resumptions of certain themes from the chapters „Constructionist theory of speech" and „About the consensus trance", author Sandu, A. (2012g). *Logic and theory of argumentation.* Iasi, Romania: Lumen Publishing House, originally published in Romanian.

The constructionist theory of speech

The analysis of the argumentative and/or para-argumentative structure targets the consensus generating practices that transform the logical value of truth of a communicational structure into a value of intrinsic semantic truth of it. Groarke (2011) shows that in the practice of public speech, the argumentation is based on blurred structures, starting from premises, undeclared hypothesis, but implied as true. The argumentative practices identified through informal logic can use visual premises (Groarke, 2011) in argumentative purpose, the logical operations operating on the hypertext or even the metatext. In our opinion, the logical operations become semiotic operations of identifying the connectors that ensure the syntax at the level of hypertext.

The analysis of communication as space of social construction of reality raises the issue of strategies of regaining interpretative consensus situated outside the formal speech. Gilbert, cited by Groarke (2011), shows that the argumentative process is drawn from its Aristotelian senses, based exclusively on ration, drifting towards defying the strategies of gaining interpretative consensus. We therefore raise the question on the legitimacy of this interpretiative drift. In our opinion, it can be accepted as legitimate, as long as the definition of truth no longer refers to the correspondence, but to interpretative consensus. The theory of consensual truth rejects the idea of correspondence, starting from the idea that, at least in many situations, if not most of them, the acceptance of social construct called reality, and of whose derived social constructs are not based on correspondence, but of interpretative consensus. The truth is constructed and it makes sense as truth inside an interpretative community. The theory of superstrings can make sense and have value of truth inside an interpretative community formed by physicists, theoreticians, and can as well constitute a new meaning in an interpretative community of professing Christians.

Within the constructionist paradigm, logic retains the meaning of analysis of the ways of generating acceptable consensus. In our opinion, acceptability (plausibility) replaces validity in a possible constructionist logic. An argumentative construction doesn't have to be valid in order to generate interpretative consensus, but rather be plausible inside the generated universe of speech that is being governed by the existing interpretative conventions. We could say that the constructionist logic and epistemology inverts the idea of reasoning upon truth with that of

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reasoning upon what can be accepted as true. Translated into colloquial language, constructionism goes beyond the idea of saying what you think, by the fact of thinking what you say. It is not enough to state that "a" is "b" without mentioning the particular conditions and for what interpretative community "a" is "b". Outside that certain interpretative community, "a" is undefined and, therefore, it can simultaneously be "b" and ~„b".

The theory of consensual truth

From the Habermas criticism we took the two distinct theoretical poles, namely the analysis of the micro-level theories on social rationality, based on communicative structures and language acts, as well as integrative theories on macro-level modern society. The communicative action directed towards reaching consensus codes a particularly postmodern power strategy, namely refining power, the development of seductive strategies and replacing force with the soft power of convincing (Nye, 1990, 2004, 2011).

The semiotic part ensures the interpretative unity of the world through the co-construction of social reality (Sandu, 2014, 2013a). The interpretative part involves a "negotiation of definition" that the dialogue partners operate with. Therefore, we have paid closer attention to the social construction of reality as a communicative action. We extended the area of communicative action to the entire social pragmatics. We interpreted the social action as a discursive-seductive strategy of exercising power in the public space. We joined the constructionist idea, according to which, public space is represented by any area of co-constructing of reality through social or communicative action.

The correspondence truth leaves wide space to the undecidable. To say that a flower is beautiful is impossible to accept or fight against through classic logical means. However, flower trade needs operations of classification and valuing in order to function. The argumentation of the florist will start from the opinion of the majority of buyers. The rational consensus is when the participants in a negotiation of interpretations are rationally motivated to consider acceptable a certain position. The rational consensus doesn't constitute a compromise, but a total agreement from the participants. Habermas (2000) distinguishes five categories of the theories of truth:

- Theories of correspondence truth
- Theories of coherence truth
- Pragmatism theories of truth
- Semantic theories of truth
- Theories of redundancy

The ontological dimension of social constructionism assumes that reality itself is a social construct, generated from multiple negotiations on interpretations that individuals give to the world. Reality has the meaning that the individuals construct – in the process of communication – and assign it to the people. This ontological view takes into account the Kantian distinction between things in themselves and phenomena. As a phenomenon, the world is a social (communicative-intersubjective) construction whose purpose is socially set, but once established it becomes real as the context of coexistence.

Constructionist ontology (Sandu, 2011) that we propose aims a reality built on levels in the manner proposed by Basarab Nicolescu. From our perspective, the social construction of reality is precisely the identification of areas of transparency to knowledge, which individuals disengaged and who's meaning one negotiates with otherness. The existence is real for the individual to the extent to which it creates limits. Exceeding the limits, is the process of sensification that is establishing meaning. In ontological terms, we do not consider reality as devoid of substance in a purely idealistic manner.

Habermas (Braaten, 1991) introduces the theory of consensual truth as a form of pragmatic theory of truth. Habermas (2000) sees consensus as being the fundamental criteria of Truth Claims. The consensual truth is the theory of truth most used in discursive practices. The meaning of truth should be identified in the way of using the term in the communicational process. For Habermas (2000), the ultimate meaning of the concept of truth, from a social point of view, is that of creating the distinction between knowledge and ignorance, therefore fulfilling the most basic need of the human community, that of solidarity based on rational agreement (Vladutescu, 2014). Truth is correlated with the communicational competence, drifting from the role of notion in fulfilling a communicational purpose (Braaten, 1991).

The social pragmatic as a reconstructive science is understood as operating in the space of using acts of language in order to construct a

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mutual understanding. Communicational competence is built around the linguistic competence. Communicative acts (Vladutescu, 2013; Frunza, 2011) are of dialogic nature, being directed towards an acting purpose (Badillo, 1991). In our opinion, the acting act is a power strategy, setting a position of negotiation upon which the subject will situate in the context of general negotiations of interpretations.

The essence of a term is not invariable to the transformations of social and communicative contexts, therefore the same term can differ as meaning based on the communicative context. The constructionist paradigm shows that the change of language convention that generated a meaning to a term leads to the alteration of the designated itself (the signified). In specific terms of the constructionist paradigm, words create worlds (Gergen, 2005). The model of analysis proposed for identifying the semantic drift and the co-variation of the designated based on the interpretative context.

Foucault examines the regimes of truth and the ways in which they are constructed in different types of speech: medical, legal, educational (Baynham, 1995).

The essence of the semiotic pact consists of the convention on power legitimacy. Once the power is established, it acts as if it were a transcendental, imposing order to co-existence. Redefining power in the communicative process tends to humanize the experience and to express it to the level of subtle soft power expressed as communicative action (Sandu, 2013b; Sandu, Caras, 2013).

Social reality is constructed around the communicative interactions of the negotiation processes of the interpretations that permanently take place among the actors of the communication. The constructionist ontology similar to postmodernism has an anti-systematic, anti-essentialist nature. Constructionism doesn't automatically reject the meta-stories, but analyses the interpretative drift that a meta-story support in different particular communicative contexts.

About the consensus trance

Erickson and Rossi (1976) describe an experience of subjective reconstruction of reality as a state of trance (Erickson, Rossi, 1976). Being bedridden and in great pain, in a moment when doctors were predicting his imminent death, Erickson, being a child, wishes to see the sunset for the last time, with the help of a mirror that will allow him to

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see the sky from the position in which he was staying. The sick child manages to see the sunset filling the whole sky despite of a tree that was interfering between the mirror and the sky and that should have partially obstructed his view. The selective perception of removing the tree from his view, completing the image with elements from his own memory that would reconstruct the sunset and block the image of the tree. The future psychiatrist identified this state with a trance that he describes as an alteration of the perception of reality under suggestive influence. The state of trance represents, for Erikson, an everyday phenomenon where the human is absorbed while waiting for the bus, reading or listening to music, is absorbed by physical exercise, isolating his attention from the irrelevant stimuli.

From Erickson's point of view, the state of trance differs from the classical one from psychiatry, returning rather to a sum of states of the consciousness that follows one another in the everyday life, characterized by focusing the attention on a certain question, experience that will cause astonishment, unusual, surprize, interest. The waking state is an alternation between the perceptive attention on the environment and micro-trances.

Charles Tart (1987) identifies the waking state with a consensual trance one, the individual suppressing the apperception of reality that is being replaced by the interpretative consensus. The consensual trance is induced by society by the very socialization processes though means of mass-media, manifestations of power/acceptance, etc. For this reason, the individuals are social automatons whose activity, thinking patterns and behaviours are almost mechanic and dictated by the consensus of the interpretations existing in their own social environment. The communicational practices, including the contemporary argumentative ones follow the construction of consensus turning to transgene elements such as: call for emotional states, fundamental needs such as acceptance and being part of a group, persuasive techniques, etc. The constructionist logic previously discussed is adaptable to the transgenic condition since it itself analyses the grammar of the consensual trance to which the individual had adhered.

Charles Tart analyses the normal states of consciousness using the same instruments of analysing the hypnotic phenomenon. The central question targets the frameworks in which the current

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consciousness, or the so-called waking state is developed. Consensus is seen as a state of trance, a particular state called sleeplike when the capacity of paying attention to the environment is diminished by the lack of provocative stimuli. This state is induced by society, and the "hypnotist" is represented by culture. The consensus trance is considered more powerful and more artificial than medical hypnosis, but not less transgenic (trancelike).

The consensus trance is based on diminishing vitality and reducing the cognitive functionality based on a profound abstraction from the immediate sensorial, due to the abstracting of reality. This transgene particularity of consensus is based on defining culture by "share basic beliefs" on world and constituting certain practices of coping with it. Social interactions have the purpose of group survival and perpetuation of the existing fundamental beliefs. This process represents "the continuous renegotiation of the interpretations" and the interpretative agreement or semiotic pact. Unlike the rational nature of the consensus promoted by Habermas, Tard analyses the irrational perspectives that are the base of the society based on consensus functioning. The process of socialising implies the reduction of the individual's potential to the cultural normality. The semiotic pact that established the social syntax and semantics of a community is not relevant for the individual until the grammar of the social life is interrupted by an obvious inadequacy of the systems to the stimuli.

Introducing the consensus trance, in Tard's vision, is that process of configuring the behaviour and consciousness of the individual in order to normalize him and ensure a high degree of standardizing of his conduct and beliefs. The consensus trance ensures the normal functioning of the individual, allowing him to have pre-configured answers to everyday situations. This position is a asemiotic one. The symbol no longer operates semantically. The cultural symbols become symbols that trigger social actions. The un-deliberative gaining of consensus liberates the communicative actor of the anguish of responsibility, the subject receiving operational constructs that he internalises as contextual meta-stories whose universalities are limited to the interpretative community.

The transgene potential of the consensus is used in communicative, deceptive strategies. States such as serenity, calm,

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coherence, mutual understanding, words capable of strengthen the consensual trance into consciousness are being evoked. Cultural myths are being used, often hyperbolised at the level of political religions (Sandru, 2014). The magnificent and spectacular imposes consensus based on unconsciousness, terror, self-positioning as marginal. The rational participation to the development of the semiotic pact and the generating of social constructs is partial. The voluntary consensus is rarely critical. Accepting authority as a consensual, pragmatic truth is one of the most current instruments of public communication, being part of the arsenal of each public relations campaign.

The manipulation of symbols is the form through which an acting command by means of consensual trance is being anchored. The slogan "The candidate shows up, the sun rises" used in a campaign for the President of Romania, hence turning the candidate into a cosmic icon, transferring towards the politician transcendental symbols, generally known as belonging to divinity.

The participation and political adherence wishes to be ritual and quasi-religious. The main constituent of the consensus trance is represented by the adherence to an obvious paralogism, or better, to an indecisive logical structure. Invoking the inherent but nonconforming logic is a strategy of credibility, and the call for ethical values, one of legitimacy (Bortun).

The mechanisms specific to Neuro-Linguistic Programming have incorporated the principles of Erickson and Charles Tart and, together with techniques taken from other persuasive practices have constituted the background for a system of personal development that allows the improvement of the individual's communication by adapting the message to the symbolic universe of the receiver.

Visual semiotics: The dismissal of the President.

We will take as an example the field of advertising, namely a commercial regarding the dismissal of the President of Romania during the Referendum from July 29, 2012.

The poster places a circle in the middle, having the word "Yes" inside, underneath which you could read, in capital letters, the words "Dismiss him", followed by the phrase "Come to the Referendum" with

normal case, while on the top of the poster it says "Are you tired of scandal? Do you want a normal life?"

The poster seeks interpretative consensus in order to dismiss the suspended President of Romania, through the votes of the participants to the Referendum. The argumentation doesn't bring into discussion the motives for suspending the President, but suggests that changing him from the current position will lead to serenity and stability, in contrast with the political scandals. The argumentative structure behind the poster would be: *The president is guilty of all the political scandals in the country, dismissing the President would lead to an ending of the scandals, therefore it is recommended for the citizens to dismiss the President. This action cannot be completed by only participating to the Referendum; hence the citizen should also participate in the Referendum and vote "Yes".*

The interpretative consensus is called not only by means of the mentioned argumentation, but also through the personal call to the elector persuaded directly by saying such as: "You are fed up" (you, the elector), and "You want" (you, the elector). The direct addressing to the elector customizes the message, creating a relationship quasi-particular between the author of the commercial and its reader, identified as an individuality that has the option to choose, and therefore stand out from the other members of the interpretative community, namely the ones that want to dismiss the President.

The argument appeals to emotional structures such as "saturation", the volitional structures "You want", and the aspirational ones "A better life". Finally, the poster calls to the mobilization of the reader that accepts the content of the message and interiorizes it, later acting accordingly and voting "Yes". The argumentative structure outgoes the mere simple belief by urging them to transform the belief in political social action. Argumentation is however implicit and elliptical, visible being the call for feelings, will, action. The logic of the mentioned advertising discourse is an implicit one, the main call not being addressed on a rational level, but on an emotional and attitude one. The logical level only ensures rational coherence, without which the interpretative consensus could not be gained.

In our opinion, we are dealing with an addressed interpretative community, which fits an ambiguous logic that transforms the President into a symbol of popular discontent, whose dismissal would turn into a

gesture of normality. The interpretative convention reduces the construct of normal to the lack of scandals and, mostly, of changing the President. The interpretative consensus is based on accepting an exclusive disjunction between the good life of the citizen and the exercising of the President's mandate. The reduction was operated the moment this silent admittance of a relationship of equivalence between the lack of political scandal and the good life of the subjects took place, and also the development of the ambiguous nature of the construct of good life by suggesting an interpretative consensus that drains the construct of sense. There can be no other logical operation to connect good life to the activity of the President, other than the operation of defining accepted in a constructionist sense of instituting the meaning: the logical form of the operation is: "Good Life = Empty Set" if there is the President, and "Good life is a non-empty set, unquantifiable in the absence of the President".

The President acts as a logical function in whose presence or absence, the sphere of the *good life* construct becomes zero, or any other value. The logical and semantic principle that operates is represented by a convergence between the non-contradiction and the multiple-datur. The developed argumentation is convincing in the framework of the interpretative community that operates with the principles of the mentioned logic. The purpose of the commercial is to capture the reader in the mentioned interpretative community. Inside the interpretative community, the interpretative consensus ensures the acceptability of the conclusions and justifies the social-political action.

The audit of a communication campaign: tablet, parrot and the University.

We used the discursive analysis grid in identifying the internal and external organizational communication, building around it and instrument for communication audit in organizations.

The communication audit can be done from two perspectives – that of internal communication evaluation under the aspect of coherent communication paths, and that of the validity of the communicative interaction message between departments, the integration of communication in the organizational culture and the joining of the members to its values, the transformation of the constitutive values in practice principles of organization, etc.

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In our opinion, the internal communication audit is strictly related to the audit of ethical practices developed by organisations and ultimately resulting into the audit of communication, organisational cultures and ethical practices in the organization.

The audit of external communication and of an organization's PR targets the messages, and their impact and coincidence between the received communication intentions.

Traditionally, the audit of the external communication targets the analysis of the campaingn's message in correlation with the target audience, the notoriety of the organization, its positioning and that of its products both on the market, and in front of stakeholders. From the perspective of this article, we will be interested in how an emotional response as an affirmative action from the receivers is being developed. An error in attribution, for example an image that the developers of the campaign attribute a particular meaning that is contrary, or at least different from the general interpretative consensus on certain symbolic elements contained by the message, can generate a trance of consensus with adverse effects.

For illustration, we present a communication campaign of a University during enrolment for the new students. The University turns to a company specialized in public relations and communication in order to develop the communication strategy and promoting for the Department of "Communication and public relations", newly launched. At the end of the campaign when the University couldn't attract any students to this Department, I was asked to conduct an audit of communication in order to identify the real effects of the campaign and the causes of its failure in attracting students.

According to the monitoring report of the campaign and the media communication provided by the implementing company, the target audience was constituted of high school graduates that want to enrol in the university classes in the field of Communication. The services offered by the agency were the development of the strategy of media communication and the promoting, monitoring and evaluation of it. In order to implement the campaign, there were used the following means of promoting:

- Mesh with a total surface of 50 square meters, exhibited for 2 weeks on a central building with intense pedestrian traffic in the city where the University has its headquarters.
- Street banner – one single banner of 6 square meters, displayed for 1 month on high traffic street of the same city.
- Flyers - distributed in the areas of the correction centres of the baccalaureate exams, 1 day.
- Radio - in 2 cities, 2 broadcasts a day, for 1 month.
- Flash digital tables – 1 digital table for 1 month, in a mall.
- Online banner on an events website with high traffic.
- Yahoo Messenger.
- Facebook.

The results supplied by the implementing company were media coverage, in local and national publications, increase in traffic on the University's website, etc. Starting from this data from the report, we developed the communication audit[3]. The central and innovating idea of the campaign was customizing the educational offer by the association between the Department of Communication and Public Relations as an educational offer, and the use of top communicational technologies by the future communicators trained by the specific provider of education.

In order to emphasize this, they introduced, in the offer of the specific study program, for students to receive an electronic tablet as communication support, courses storage and digital textbooks support. The relationship between the modern communicational technologies and the study programme was meant to suggest the idea of a qualitative and new generation education precisely since, at the moment of this campaign, the tablets were relatively new products on the Romanian market. In order to suggest the idea of communication, in the centre of the tablet there were represented a series of 4 birds which we identified as being parrots. Therefore, the main idea of the campaign should be transforming the simple gossip and the communicational talent of the students through means of top communicational technologies and the studies in the field of communication, into professionalism and expertise in the field of communication and public relations.

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[3] Due to confidentiality reasons we will not present data that could lead to identifying the communication agency and its beneficiary. For the same reasons, the visual representations used in the campaign will also not be made public.

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The central element of the mash and of the entire campaign is represented visually by a black square, hence the mentioned tablet and the series of parrots in the middle. In our opinion, the message transmitted was a wrong one, because the usual semiotic agreement is that parrots on a string rather represent a series of persons that gossip and are easy to be manipulated. Therefore, the subsequent idea can be that the future students are being fooled by the provider of education. In Romanian, the expression "to be taken as a parrot" means to be cheated, deceived. It is true that the expression "to be a great parrot" is used in the meaning of a good communicator. However, the expression has a negative connotation, representing a manipulative communicator who uses communication strategies usually in non-ethical purposes. This is why, regardless of the meaning assigned subconsciously, either the one according to which the students are themselves being manipulated by the provider of educational services, or the one according to which the communicative practices in which they are trained are manipulative, creates a detrimental image to the provider of educational services.

Regarding the tablet, the idea of offering it to the students is a creative and innovative one. In the lack of an adequate campaign of associating it to a symbol of advanced technology, it fails, and the slogan "Each student with his own tablet" and specifically the one "Come get your tablet" leads to the medical meaning of the term "tablet". The word "tablet" means, in Romanian, both a PC tablet and a medicine. Since the phrase "to have birds in your head" is associated, in Romanian, with having a mental disease, the association between birds and the tablet may lead to a game of words against the beneficiary, the message of the campaign being transformed into a subliminal one, from "Come to have access to technology and knowledge of the strategies of communication in order to develop your communicating potential", into the one absolutely insulting for the potential students, which is "Come get your pills because you are mentally ill". This transformation is possible due to the multiple meaning of the words "parrot" and "tablet" previously mentioned.

Another significant error is the misuse of the logo of the provider of education. The communication agency, wanting to offer promoting solutions to the beneficiary, reconfigured its logo, using it in

the campaign before the new logo having had time to be associated with the beneficiary in the public consciousness.

In our opinion, this prevents the campaign and the promoted study programme from gaining awareness and visibility, and in the same time it diminishes the image and notoriety transfer from the study programme towards the provider of education. Placing the logo in a marginal position in the graphic concept, especially since the logo is new in the consciousness of the public, makes it impossible to generate an interpretative consensus to retain the traditional customers, hence to attract new ones.

One of the most significant errors was the lack of coordination between the visual component of the campaign, and the general image of the provider. We also noticed the insufficient repetition of the campaign regarding its capacity of persuasion. The audio messages transmitted during the campaign had, in our opinion, the effect of trivializing the content of the promoted educational process, since they were referring to the free give-away of the tablets in exchange for studying trivial things regarding the audio spots broadcasted in prime-time.

The exclusive reference to gaining material advantages, the tablet, in this case, intends to persuade the potential candidates, offering them an extra reason to further the desired action, that of enrolling in the mentioned study programme. Apparently, the approach creates competitive advantages from other similar programmes existing on the market, drawing attention on the facility of access to this programme and other collateral advantages, such as receiving the tablet.

In the context in which the Romanian public opinion is preoccupied by the quality of the higher education, awarding certain educational institutions the epithet "diploma factories", the accent on the alleged ease in graduating from the promoted study programme may draw the attention of future students that are amateurs of an easy graduation, and in the same time drive away the potential candidates that are interested in qualitative education. In our opinion, the audio message of the spots that promote the ease of the studies contrasts with the general idea of the campaign, of creating a positive image for a competitive and new generation study programme. The message of the campaign is contradictory, both transmitting the idea of new and connected to technology, and that of ease in promoting the study

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programmes. We must say that on the long term, a message that uses a non-Aristotelian logic based on the excluded third, may have success due to the capacity to cause cognitive rupture, and to annihilate the trance of consensus, the interruption of consensus and the blocking of the uniform action, drawing attention towards the message. When the subliminal message is clearly constructed, the interruption of consensus and the blocking of uniform action of the commercial can generate the effect of notoriety, a non-monotonous message generates point of mental focus, facilitating its retention.

Conclusions

The interpretative community is the one that institutes the language convention, and together with it, the logical principles that operate in the universe of speech. There can be interpretative communities based on a logic of the excluded third or even the included multiple and the interpretative community that excludes the principle of non-contradiction. Each of this particular logics generates its own semantic system with a very own axiomatic. From the perspective of the communication sciences, interpreting particular logics specific to the given interpretative communities allows the adequacy of the messages and its translation from one semantic universe to another.

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Biodata

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